

CANADIAN COAST GUARD

LOWER MAINLAND ADVISORY COUNCIL

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ADVISING THE COAST GUARD

The Lower Mainland Advisory Council of the Canadian Coast Guard is a stakeholder group broadly representative of diverse marine communities in western Canada. It is co-chaired by a community member and Coast Guard employee and meets at the Sea Island hovercraft base. It receives reports and makes recommendations concerning maritime matters. LMAC is co-chaired by a university academic and contains members working in or associated with commercial fisheries, port operations, airlines, airports, recreational boating, activist groups (e.g. Georgia Strait Alliance), Power Squadron, business and industry.

The Vancouver LMAC welcomes the Coast Guard desire to become a learning organization. Each LMAC meeting involves activities intended to foster learning about marine matters.

LMAC was formed about 18 years ago and has been at the centre of debates around aids-to-navigation, rescue diving, lighthouses, Search and Rescue. Members are not paid. LMAC considers itself a friend of Coast Guard and enjoys congenial relationships with key operators at lifeboat stations, radio stations and the Rescue Coordination Centre.

LMAC typically meets face-to-face twice a year at the Sea Island Coast Guard hovercraft base. In addition, the Chair attends meetings of Advisory Council chairs from up and down the coast.

Because of its size, cold water and vast coastline, Canada has a unique – and generally well-respected - marine Search and Rescue system. Coast Guard rescuers are well-trained and devoted to the task.

Roger Boshier has worked with several Coast Guard rescue units, done large-scale analysis of marine incidents databases, interviewed (and written) about survivors of “man overboard” incidents and produced a socio-political analysis of safety issues embedded in cancellation (and then restoration) of the Coast Guard rescue diving program.

KISILANO COAST GUARD BASE

The Vancouver-area Coast Guard Lower Mainland Advisory Council (LMAC) is opposed to the plan to close Kits base because:

- Of blitzkrieg politics used to reach this decision
- The fact the decision is driven by ideology, not “facts”
- The impact on the image of Vancouver
- Increased danger to users of waterways in the Vancouver area.

Blitzkrieg politics

Current eruptions concerning Kits base are the latest manifestation of a discursive struggle about what it means to be a Canadian.

Public administration changed dramatically in the late 1970s when Margaret Thatcher came to power, neoliberalism became a worldwide movement, economic rationalism and “new” public management took over. Human, social and safety services were commodified, privatized and marketized. Services remaining in the government bailiwick were increasingly rendered within a business framework.

There is now a worldwide tendency to use the language (and concepts) of business in public administration. As a result, Coast Guard operations are encumbered by nonsensical and mind-numbing reference to “alternative service delivery,” “benchmarks”, “best practices” “visions”, “service delivery,” “levels of service,” “stakeholders” and “excellence.”

The language of business is used to discipline employees and citizens with “unrealistic” or “unbusinesslike” preoccupations about culture, heritage, what it means to be Canadian and rescuing people from cold water.

The planned Kits Base closure is part of the new public management and blitzkrieg politics practised in Ottawa. At the centre of blitzkrieg politics is:

- Totalizing and overwhelming control from the centre – the “highest levels” of the government of Canada
- The ability to make “hard” decisions and suppress opposition
- An unrelenting focus on the neoliberal search for “efficiency”
- A focus on techno-rational “solutions” not sullied by human needs
- Minimising the time between “announcement” and “application” so as to stunt opposition
- The use of deceptive corporate jargon to conceal the downside of anticipated “reforms.”

By their nature, blitzkrieg politics are anti-democratic. In the case of Kits base and reshuffling of Marine Communication Centres, there are many manifestations of blitzkrieg politics at work. Such as:

- **Secrecy** and the absence of consultation. Even senior Pacific region Coast Guard managers claim they did not know what was coming – until it washed up on their shores. Employees about to lose their jobs – or be sent somewhere else – got about one hours notice. The Vancouver (and other B.C.-based) LMAC heard nothing from officials. We heard about it on CBC News.
- **Language.** Like the earlier light station debacle, MCTS restructuring is a “modernization” or “streamlining” initiative.” Cuts are constructed as expansion. Degrading marine safety is touted as “improvement”. In a typical postmodern way the big lie becomes the truth. Within blitzkrieg discourse there is little regard for data.

Ideology, not data

The decision to close Kits base is “faith-based.” Couched with a discourse of “efficiency,” “modernization” and “prudent” use of taxpayer dollars, the reasoning behind it is flawed because of the lack of regard for facts concerning marine SAR.

Policy is being driven by bafflegab and attempts to apply principles of business to public services. Faith-based approaches do not provide a sound platform for public policy and have eroded attempts to gather statistics capable of illuminating Search and Rescue and other functions of Kits base.

By discarding the long form census and gun registry and eroding other data-gathering exercises, Ottawa has demonstrated their disdain for facts. In Canada there is a long tradition of inept data-gathering exercises concerning marine operations. For example, although Transport Canada runs an “Office of Boating Safety” nobody knows (with any degree of certainty) how many boats there are in British Columbia.

Coast Guard coxswains at lifeboat stations know what is happening but, as demonstrated in this (and earlier) debacles, inside the new public management, their opinions do not count.

National Defence/Coast Guard Rescue Centres do good work but, like Coast Guard, have been destabilized by turmoil and restructuring. Data-gathering and statistics are not a priority. Federal attempts to monitor lifeboat stations and the type and frequency of marine incidents are eroded by:

- Incomplete data bases and too much “missing” data
- Haphazard data collection
- Disdain for qualitative data or any understanding of human subjectivity
- Frequent changes to the way variables are coded – which make it impossible to measure trends
- Exclusion of and a lack of interest in understanding “incidents” or “assistance” occurring out of sight of federal officials

During a rescue, Coast Guard radio operators, Rescue Centre controllers and rescuers in aircraft, on hovercraft, cutters or inshore rescue boats are not preoccupied with statistics. A lot of marine assistance or SAR occurs far from the purview of Rescue Centres. In short, Ottawa does not know much about what happens and is therefore is not well-placed to make sound decisions. Just like during rescue diving and lighthouse destaffing controversies, Ottawa statements concerning Kits base are not supported by evidence.

Although hovercraft and other rescuers create narrative records in their logbooks, RCC has no way of gathering or analyzing subjective stories of survivors or rescuers. Hence, in RCC data bases, complex incidents are often reduced to one or two words (e.g. “skipper drunk,” “heart attack”, “hand in winch,” “ran into lighthouse”) capable of being squeezed into a data-field.

Concerning Kits base, there are many stories but no place where these are brought together and analyzed in a meaningful way. One attempt to address this deficiency was Boshier’s *Man*

Overboard: Survivor Stories (Paper Presented At SARSCENE 2000, Laval, Quebec) which depended on interviews with people who had fallen into cold water and lived to talk about it.

Struggling to stay alive in northern waters provides an exquisite perspective on concepts like “modernization” “restructuring” and “streamlining.” Talk to someone like Iwona Silvarich or Glen Ringdal (overboard in Georgia Strait) and they will express a profound interest in seeing a helicopter or Coast Guard cutter. At that moment, they have no interest in corporatist bafflegab.

Vancouver? The triangle of shame

Vancouver is routinely rated as one of the best cities in the world. But most “liveability” measures include subcales focussed on the “safety and security” of citizens. Nobody will be persuaded removal of a Coast Guard station improves their safety and security.

Because of social media, the word is already out and it will not be long before people thinking about boarding a ferry or cruise ship in Vancouver, or getting on an aircraft at YVR will have heard the news – Vancouver has closed their Coast Guard base. All that remains are students in a rubber boat.

Friends overseas regularly ask if police still taser visitors at Vancouver airport. And whether a hockey riot will break out during their next trip here? Will the missing Coast Guard station become the next point on this triangle of Vancouver shame?

There is also the problem of Canada’s marine SAR obligations under international SOLAS (saving of lives at sea). It may take a while for commercial shippers and the International Maritime Organisation to hear Vancouver does not have a viable Coast Guard station. But, once this news gets out, the response will not be positive.

Increased danger

As well as locals, an impressive number of visitors get on cruise ships or use ferries. As demonstrated during the fatal *Sun Boy* incident (when a family was trapped underwater) there is sometimes conflict between user groups. In addition, Vancouver has developed a reputation for big public events (e.g. fireworks) that create special challengers for mariners and rescuers.

Senior Coast Guard officials in the Pacific region say MCTS and Kits base decisions were not made locally. Rather, working with Pacific region data, they were made at the “highest levels” of the government of Canada. Whoever made the decision is cognitively challenged. Their difficulties are evident in the fluid (ever-changing) discourse “explaining” future plans.

First Story: When first announced, it was suggested Sea Island would be the substitute for Kits Base. But Sea Island is on a shallow tidal channel. Coast Guard cutters or inshore rescue boats (IRBs) – such as those used at Kits – cannot run up the channel to Sea Island. In B.C. “Sailing Directions” (the mariners bible) this channel is marked not navigable. When LMAC reported this fact to the *Vancouver Sun* and discounted the notion of diverting hovercraft to trivial incidents in English Bay, the story changed.

Second Story: As criticism of the first story mounted there was a hurried attempt to create something better. The centrepiece of the second story was:

- In Vancouver there will be an IRB with summer students or naval reservists
- “SAR partners” (e.g. Jericho Sailing Club or Vancouver Police) would do tasks previously done by Kits base.
- Unpaid (volunteer) Coast Guard auxiliaries will be put in the untenable position of being asked to respond to distress incidents and, by so doing, scabbing on Coast Guard employees. Although the Auxillary does a good job, volunteer accountants, carpenters, car mechanics and other ordinary citizens cannot be expected to respond to ship fires, groundings, ferry and other emergencies in place of fulltime rescue specialists (in many cases, trained at the Coast Guard College).

This “plan” was explained to Marine Advisory Council Chairs during a conference call orchestrated by Coast Guard (Pacific Region).

The second is probably not the last story because it is almost childlike in its naivety.

By claiming there will be no degradation of marine safety in this area, the plan is reckless and insulting because:

- Although high-speed IRBs are well suited to some Kitsilano taskings, their efficiency depends upon who is aboard. Summer students and naval reservists do not have the background or experience to handle big incidents. For example, during a man-overboard search, it is important for the OS/C (on-scene commander) to secure the situation, get datum marker buoys into the water and use his/her knowledge of search theory to incident control and search patterns. This is not a job for students, no matter how exuberant, and is far beyond the competencies of naval reservists. Search theory is a complex enterprise and necessary part of a successful conclusion.
- The Vancouver area has experienced serious marine incidents where showing up in an IRB would be a joke. For example, if (as has happened) a ship (or barge) runs aground in English Bay, the only job for an IRB would be to go to Starbucks to get coffee for the deck officer on the ship. If (as has happened) a ferry catches fire in Howe Sound, what can an IRB do? If (as has happened) the Kwok family are run down by a ferry and people are dying, what can the IRB do? If (as has happened) a recreational vessel is flipped by a towboat cable, a family dies, and divers are urgently needed, what is the IRB supposed to do? If (as has happened) high winds are creating havoc amongst moorings or capsizing boats trying to get up the North Arm of the river, what is an IRB supposed to do? IRBs have their uses but the historic heft of Kits base has been the cutter – used time and time again for incidents like those described.
- Like the Coast Guard cutter and IRB, hovercraft were designed for a specific job and, while versatile and suited to mudflats, shallows and river delta, the purpose of the Sea Island base is to protect passengers flying from YVR and assist people (including those trapped in vehicles) on the Fraser River, at ferry terminals and out in the Gulf Islands. Kits base and Sea Island are the two busiest lifeboat stations in Canada and it is folly to think the

work of one can be offloaded to the other. As a resident of the Flat Top Islands (a 25 minute ETT – estimated time of travel for the hovercraft) the author will suffer (or die) if, after sending a distress call, it turns out the hovercraft cannot respond because it is in Squamish or Deep Cove attending to a incident that would have been the responsibility of Kits Base. Because the hovercraft is already tasked to jumpers off Fraser River bridges (e.g. Alex Fraser; Duff Patullo) - well upstream from the coast - it already spends too much time “off station.” If, while up river, an aircraft reports it is landing with a fault (or alarm going) the hovercraft has to use full power to get on-scene. It is unreasonable – and a reckless use of expensive (but much-appreciated) equipment to think the hovercraft can add Kits Base duties to their usual taskings. Having worked with the hovercraft on man overboard incidents, groundings, collisions, capsizes, ship fires, missing divers and searches for kayakers, the author has an acute appreciation of their challenges. The best place for the hovercraft is on-station at Sea Island – waiting for big incidents for which it is uniquely suited. With only one crew on shift, the hovercraft cannot be stretched to satisfactorily respond to incidents in their zone along with those in the Kits base area.

- For good historic reasons, in Canada, SAR is federal responsibility with international (IMO) implications. Even though they work a few incidents (when they feel like it) Jericho Sailing Club and Vancouver Police are not mandated to engage in, nor are they trained for, marine SAR. The fact someone at “the highest levels” of the Canadian government would try devolving marine SAR to these parties is reprehensible and an insult to citizens. The idea summer students (working 9 to 5), naval reservists or “SAR partners” can emulate the work of Kits Base is bizarre and hardly worth further discussion. Quite apart from their competence – or lack thereof – they do not work the required hours (24/7). Moreover, university students, naval reservists and the Jericho Sailing Centre do not have the authority or discretion needed to work with police – on body recovery, criminal behaviour, interdiction of stolen vessels or more sensitive matters.
- It costs about \$900,000 a year to operate Kits base and, for that, Canada gets an assertion of its sovereignty (in an area frequented by foreign shipping and US navy and fishing vessels). it gets a viable marine SAR service, a federal presence during major public events (e.g. cruise ship arrivals and departures, visits of dignitaries, Olympic games, fireworks). The amount involved is peanuts – and most certainly less than the cost of tires, undercarriage or navigation equipment for a fighter jet.
- Water temperature in the Vancouver is a factor. The successful Glen Ringdal/Glen Baron search occurred in 18 degree water but both survivors were close to death when pulled out. After 1.5 hours in 5 degree water, Lloyd Webb was clinically dead – but revived by experienced rescue specialists (and equipment) on the hovercraft. SAR “response time” is a crucial factor in maritime rescue. Cold water survival depends on body mass, physical health, preparation and water temperature. Poorly-informed Ottawa managers have claimed tasking a hovercraft into Howe Sound, English Bay or Vancouver harbour will produce the same result as sending a cutter or IRB from Kits. This is an irresponsible and erroneous claim.

What is “Reality?”

In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* the protagonist and a tiger named Richard Parker sit in a liferaft wondering about the nature of reality. Pi eventually reaches land and is contacted by marine investigators wanting to know what "really" happened to his ship.

"Well, it depends on what you mean by *really*," said Pi.

Like Pi's story, MCTS restructuring and attacks on Kits Base are acts of imagination that have nothing to do with "facts."

They reflect limited conceptions of reality and have more to do with simple-minded assumptions concerning the alleged "efficiencies" of business principles. They also depend on "benchmarks" not relevant to the Canadian context and "best practices" detached from the rigours of marine SAR and dangers of cold water in western Canada.

The federal position concerning Kits Base and MCTS stations flows from broad and corrosive socio-political tendencies such as:

- Ideologically-driven attacks on evidence-based approaches to public administration
- Persistent restructuring, cutbacks and turmoil in government departments
- Deployment of narrow and techno-rational conceptions of reality focussed on "return on investment", "efficiency", the commodification, privatization and marketization of public services
- Continuation of an historic tendency to harass, undermine and then blame civil servants for failures of public policy
- Ideological commitments to the degovernmentalization of government.
- A naïve (and often quaint) faith in a techno-utopia where "modern" technology can replace human beings.
- An aggressive mean-spiritedness in political processes and policy-formation arenas

Vancouver-area LMAC recommendations

- Kits Base and the Vancouver MCTS station be retained and consideration given to broadening their mandates.
- Resources and effort be devoted to creating data-gathering methodologies capable of moving public policy formation from faith to evidence based approaches.